



Using Effective Leadership Strategies in the Workplace



**It's a bird,
It's a plane,
It's a TOXIC Employee**

Toxic Employees

by Dr. Robert K. Bitting

Just as kryptonite saps Superman of all his superpowers, a "toxic employee" can sap the energy right out of your company. This toxic employee - true to the name - can poison the business atmosphere where you work, and can make it difficult, if not impossible, to manage effectively. The toxicity is insidious, and can drag you, your staff and co-workers into an abyss of low morale and decreased productivity. But there is hope, and it begins by first recognizing the characteristics of these employees. The list can be long, but generally the toxic employee:

- Is overly negative, and always blames other people for his problems. He thinks, "It's not me, it's you." Or it's the company's sick leave policy, or his computer, or that incompetent clerk in accounting, or... He fails to be held personally accountable for his actions, and yet expects all the "rights" - and often more - that he feels are his due.
- Is a master of illusion. Instead of spending his energies working, he spends his energies pretending to work. This is not the same thing as being overtly lazy, which is much easier to deal with as a manager. Instead, the toxic employee can be productive when he wants to be, but his constructive efforts are sporadic at best. More often, he does only what is minimally expected of him to avoid being reprimanded, or to receive some sort of reward - a paycheck or recognition, for example. It's like the commercial where the little girl is doing all house cleaning while her brother lays on the couch. As the mother arrives home the phone rings and the girl stops to answer it, just to have her brother jump up, grab the vacuum cleaner, and get all the credit from a grateful mom. The toxic employee is very adept at taking credit where credit is not due, thereby severely disrupting the morale of his hard working colleagues.

- Is creative - creative in finding ways to draw unsuspecting co-workers into games like "one-up-man-ship", "petty bickering" and "I-can-make-myself-look-good-while-doing-absolutely-nothing" (also known as "grab-the-glory"). The only people this person treats as important are those who he determines to be of equal or greater organizational status, or that he thinks can do him a favor. He fails to recognize the essential contributions of support staff, for example, treating them as if they are not important, or worse, as if they don't exist at all. When those people who are not being treated well by this employee see him schmoozing up to Mr. or Mrs. Big, the poison flows.
- Sabotages others' efforts by backstabbing or by withholding information. The toxic employee is skilled at the art of "hall talk", where malicious opinions are offered and rumors fly. He avoids approaching people directly with his concerns, choosing instead to communicate by hearsay and innuendo. He likes to stir things up behind the scenes, and will often then go to the boss with some "constructive" solution to the problem he himself has helped to propagate, one that most likely will involve his getting the credit at the expense of others. The toxic employee is also skilled at the art of "gatekeeping" - withholding important information that others need to do their jobs effectively. He does it out in an inconsistent or unfair fashion that favors one colleague over another. This can also, for example, take the form of only allowing selected people to use certain equipment at certain times in a seemingly random, arbitrary - and completely frustrating - fashion.
- Can be difficult to terminate, because he has aligned himself with a key decision-maker (a "protector") in the organization who seems blind to the negative effects of the toxic behavior (often he does this by cultivating the protector's friendship outside of the workplace - a.k.a. the buddy system).

Remember, a toxic employee can be quite bright and resourceful. It's how he uses, or doesn't use, his talents and energies that get in the way of a productive workplace. However, short of firing the employee, there are still several ways that you as a manager can deal with the toxicity:

- Look for signs of toxicity before the person is hired. This is not always possible of course, especially if you aren't the one doing the hiring. Ignoring support staff during the interview process (they should be involved whenever possible), not taking the time to ask about others' roles in the organization (except those at the top), and focusing only on "me", should send you a strong signal that there could be a problem in the future.
- Try to determine the cause of the toxicity. When did it start? Has it always been this way? What do you know about this person's health, for example, that could be causing his negative behavior? Is it just in certain situations and with certain people? Is it worse on Mondays than it is on Fridays? What prejudices and biases do you have that may be influencing things? In other words, what motivational forces are at play - from the toxic employee, from you, and from others? Taking time to look at the big picture is essential to understanding and dealing with the problem.
- Confront the employee about his or her behavior. The individual may not be aware of how his/her behavior is affecting others. Be specific, be prepared for a defensive reaction, and be ready to offer positive suggestions. People will often change their negative behavior if it is brought to their attention. Don't get into a mudslinging contest or you've already fallen victim to the poison.
- Be a role model. To varying degrees, we all model the behaviors of others. As a supervisor, how you conduct yourself has a tremendous impact on the behaviors of those who work for you and with you (scary, huh?).
- - Seek the help of others in dealing with the toxic employee. You're not always in it alone. Asking a productive employee with a good attitude to work with the toxic employee on a particular project may rub off in a positive way. Use the professionals in your human resources office to help when appropriate.

- Seek, and be willing to receive, feedback from others about how things are going. Don't expect everyone to have the same opinion as you do on every issue. Avoid "ganging up" on the toxic employee.
- Give the toxic employee specific tasks for which he can be held totally accountable. Make sure you follow through and don't accept excuses. Document things so if push comes to shove you have information to back you up (also known as C.Y.A.). Toxic employees are great at "talking the talk without walking the walk."
- Look for incremental improvements. Toxicity does not go away overnight. Be willing to accept gradual changes in an employee's behavior.
- Learn to recognize toxic behavior in yourself. Supervisors and managers are not immune to toxicity. Watch for autocratic behavior that may signal a problem. Continue to give others credit for contributing to your team's success. Immediately thank and acknowledge those who made a success possible - even when it would be easy to claim all the credit yourself. Toxic employees don't thrive in an environment where peoples' contributions are recognized in a consistently positive way.
- Use your sense of humor. If you don't have one, get one - and apply liberally. Remember the bottom line: Take your job seriously, but take yourself lightly. I'll say more about this in a future column.

A toxic employee is like having a low-grade infection. You can live with it for a while but, if not properly treated, it can develop into a full-blown infection - making you, and your business, suffer. Ultimately, you may have to fire the employee, but what I've suggested may offer some relief, and could even turn things around.

I'd like to hear from you about the toxic employees with whom you've had to deal, and what "medicine" you've tried to administer to effect a cure. E-mail me your workplace stories at: training@robertbitting.com, or write to me at P.O. Box 600, Alfred, NY 14802. I'll use your input for a future article.

Anyone have an aspirin?

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